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ABSTRACT

Black Americans have inherited a rich store of oral literature (folk music, folk tales, folk customs, and superstitions). When approached from the point of view of the students' experience, this oral tradition can be an effective springboard for discussion, reading, and writing in the classroom. Brass band funeral processions can be viewed as a close structural parallel to the form of classical elegy and a study of commemorative poetry written by or about blacks can be used to complement the jazz funeral-elegy comparison. Tracing the development of a character in oral literature such as Brer Rabbit can also be an effective approach; or one can trace the theme of what makes a hero. One successful unit was developed from a historical perspective to trace the black man's philosophies of freedom using folk music and poetry. The oral literature of the black community explains the present condition as the result of the past and establishes a definite relationship between the actions and reactions of the black man's ancestors to the conflicts in their lives. The oral literature is a continuing tradition, so that much of the teaching material can consist of the experiences and knowledge of oral literature that black students bring to the classroom. (HCD)

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The Oral Tradition: Springboard for Teaching Black Literature

Velez H. Wilson

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CURSE!

(Ba-O-MéMe)

Essai! Essai!
Passé manee quamé.
Passé jomo yungae.
Toménť ba-o méme!
Ba-o-méme...
A yo!

This voodoo chant is recalled by Sybil Kein, black poetess and one-time teacher in New Orleans Public School System. Miss Kein remembers that as a child she was never allowed to repeat this chant, a voodoo curse which she heard early in her childhood. She is not the only one with a story to tell of voodoo, its practices or its influences on the culture of New Orleans. Anyone who spends some time in the city can probably tell some bizarre and often fantastic tales about the practice of voodoo (or "hoodoo" as it is commonly called by native New Orleanians): tales from the market places, and tales from the old folk--elderly natives whose tales are born primarily of the superstition of their lives.

Students too have stories to tell, usually stories of relatives who were born with "veils over their eyes" and who therefore see ghosts or "spirits"; or stories of people who place chicken bones under their front steps to ward off evil spirits. Even those who have no stories to tell know about "burning black candles" or putting "gris gris" on one's enemy to get rid of him. But tales of magic and voodoo are not the only kinds of folklore that students bring to the classroom.

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This is particularly true of black students. The oral literature of black Americans has not experienced the long unhindered growth common to the oral literature of other people; it is a continuing tradition. Therefore, black people have inherited a rich store of oral literature. This vast body of oral literature (folk music, folk tales, folk customs, and superstitions) when approached from the point of view of the students' experience can be an effective springboard for discussion, reading, and writing in the classroom.

Black American folk tales, which make up a large part of the oral literature, include animal stories, human stories, heroic tales, occult tales, and many others. Richard Dorson identifies over 200 motifs;[1] and according to J. Mason Brewer, "rich strata of Negro folk phenomena still remain undiscovered."[2]

Black folk music represents a large body of oral literature also. "Music is found in some aspect in almost every important religious and secular situation in the black community."[3] There are spirituals, folk ballads, blues, code songs, work songs, prison songs, funeral songs, songs of protest, songs of freedom, and many more. These represent "a complex musical development which took place, and which is still taking place, within the black communities of the United States."[4]

Perhaps the "nowness" of the oral tradition helps to make it popular instructional material. Students respond to folk music and folk tales in various positive ways without any background information or historical perspective: some students have a personal frame of reference for the material, some use it to support their political, philosophical, social, or religious points of view; some perceive cultural patterns in the literature;

and some know only that they like it. Therefore, it is an excellent approach to teaching black literature.

Brass band funeral processions, for example, are familiar to students in New Orleans. If they have not seen a jazz funeral procession on the streets, they have seen one on television. Some of the young people have ambivalent feelings about jazz funerals; they like the music, but feel that the custom is demeaning and barbaric. There are some students who simply enjoy the music.

A growing interest among students in jazz has created more interest in its rhythmic aspects. This interest can be increased immeasurably and bring about cognitive learning with an understanding of the significance of the style of presentation and the seemingly improvisational characteristics of a jazz funeral. A demonstration of its close structural parallel to the form of classical elegy will establish a literary frame of reference for students.

Classical Elegy	Jazz Funeral
Invocation	"Lead Me, Saviour," "Just a Closer Walk"
Lament	"Nearer My God"
Praise of the Dead	"Honor, Honor unto the Dying Lamb"
Rejoicing	"Ain't Gonna Study War No More" "When the Saints Go Marching In"

A study of commemorative poetry written by or about blacks may be used to complement the jazz funeral-elegy comparison.

How much African burial idiom and customs remain in the jazz funeral would be hard to estimate. The subject can be investigated, however, in

books on the history of black music or the history of jazz. Some particularly good ones are Cool, Hot and Blue; A History of Jazz for Young People by Charles Boeckman, The Story of Jazz by Marshall Stearns, and Negro Folk Music U.S.A. by Harold Courlander.

Tracing the development of a character in oral literature can also be an effective approach. The character of Brer Rabbit in animal stories, for example, is the prototype of subsequent characters in the heroic ballads of the black community.

Originally the Brer Rabbit character symbolized a slave who was ostensibly weak but adept at using psychology on a white man to get what he wanted.[5] The character of Brer Rabbit harks back to the West African Anansi stories and perhaps even as far back as the 13th-century European Reynard Cycle. The germ of the story is reported to be found in Aesop's fables. These fables are ascribed to Aesop, a Phrygian slave of the 6th Century B.C. There is evidence, however, that some of the stories are far older, some having been discovered on Egyptian papyri of 800 or 1000 years earlier (in which case we would be back to African origin). Anansi is the hero of West African tales who is sometimes depicted as a spider and sometimes depicted as a man. "Anansi was not a great hunter, or a great worker, or a great warrior. His specialty was being clever. He likedto outwit people."[6] Outwitting the fox was Brer Rabbit's specialty, and outwitting the "marster" was a specialty of a large number of heroes in slave literature.

The deception or dupe motif became popular. In fact, through the years collectors of black folktales have called attention to the dramatic cycle of episodes pitting John, the slave, against the "marster." Recently, Julius Lester included in his book Black Folktales stories of a character named Jack

whose specialty was outwitting the devil as in the story called "Jack and the Devil's Daughter."

The evolution of the deception motif in many contemporary tales seem to be the bad man or mean man who punishes or outwits his enemies with impunity. Many stories and ballads immortalize bad men. "Stagolee rates as one of the meanest. According to one account, Stagolee was responsible for the disaster known as the San Francisco Earthquake."[7] Julius Lester's version of the life and death of Stagolee is a favorite among students. Collector's recordings of the ballad and student home movie versions may be a part of class activities. Students also enjoy comparing Stagolee to contemporary movie heroes such as Superfly and Freeman (the hero of The Spook Who Sat by the Door) and more recently to the hero of a ballad called "Leroy Brown." Interesting parallels are also found in the character of Randall Ware in Jubilee and Ras in Invisible Man.

A subtheme can be developed which students find fascinating: the question of what makes a hero. The students can examine several points of view in the essays "Heroism--Black and White" by George Washington Williams, "The White Race and Its Heroes" by Eldridge Cleaver, and "The Black Psyche" by John Oliver Killens.

One of the most successful units for me was one which students developed from a historical perspective to trace the black man's philosophies of freedom. During a study of Margaret Walker's Jubilee, the students noticed a disparity between traditional historical points of view and literary accounts of the black man's attitudes toward slavery and freedom. What resulted was a taped essay tracing the development of various philosophies of freedom; folk music and poetry were used as springboards to an investigation of the literature.

What the students found out was this: (See diagram) While slaves were singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "All God's Children" and Phillis Wheatley was extolling the blessings of slavery, George Moses Horton and Jupiter Hammon were writing about the evils of slavery. Slaves were also singing protest songs.

When slaves were singing "Go Down, Moses" and praising the deliverance of the Isrealites, they were using that spiritual and others as coded messages about the plans of the underground railroad.

When Booker T. Washington made his famous Atlanta speech in 1895, he motivated migration to the North rather than encouraging blacks to stay in the South.

During the time when James Weldon Johnson advocated freedom through the collective efforts of God and man in "Lift Every Voice," Claude McKay wrote "If We Must Die."

While the Mills Brothers were singing songs of prosperity during the war years of the 1940's, Margaret Walker, one of the avant-garde of the black nationalist movement, heralded the movement with "For My People."

With the advent of the black arts movement and the black power movement of the 1960's and 1970's, Nina Simone advocated freedom through black unity in "Young, Gifted and Black"; Leroi Jones in "Black Dada Nihilismus" said that freedom belongs to those who are strong enough to take it, while Dionne Warwick suggested that freedom lies in the togetherness of all people in her recording of "People Got to be Free." Don L. Lee said in his poem "In the Interest of Black Salvation" that one must free himself, while members of the Jesus Movement were singing "Ride On, King Jesus."

The students read a number of related selections and books for each period examined. The same kind of historical examination of contrasting philosophies could be used just as effectively with The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman or A Different Drummer, which is suitable for junior high school students or with Ellison's Invisible Man, which is best used with senior high school or college students.

Whether approached through the folk customs (jazz funeral), the folk character (Brer Rabbit), or from a philosophical point of view, the oral tradition can be considered in terms of its value as human drama. Although it is concerned with universal themes, its scope is limited to the human condition of a particular group of people in a particular locale--(in this case, black people in America). The evolution of the oral literature is symbolic of the change in their condition.

This body of literature is inherently expository. It explains the present condition as the result of the past, and it establishes a definite relationship between the actions and reactions of the black man's ancestors to the conflicts of their lives.

It we consider a list of the types of songs and stories that exist, we find that the protagonists deal with conflict in many ways; the methods most often used seem to be escape and equivocation. The characters seek escape in religion, superstition, and ironies of fate; or they circumvent direct confrontation--and achieve small victories--by using subtlety, deception, and ambiguities and by creating super heroes (John Henry) and super heroics (those of Stagolee and Superfly).

If it is true that the oral literature of black Americans is a continuing tradition, it is reasonable to assume that many of the stories and customs

are still changing. The present forms, then, must be collected from the storytellers of today. Perhaps some of those storytellers are sitting in our classrooms every day, and we overlook good teaching material when we do not use what the students bring to the classroom: their experience and knowledge of the oral tradition.

Notes

1 Richard M. Dorson, American Negro Folktales (Fawcett Publications, Greenwich, Conn., 1967) p. 16.

2 J. Mason Brewer, American Negro Folklore (Quadrangle, Chicago, 1968) p. IX.

3 Harold Courlander, Negro Folk Music U.S.A. (Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1963) p. 11.

4 Courlander, p. 14.

5 Walter Barnes, et al., The American Scene (American Book Co., New York, 1940) p. 242.

6 Edris Makward and Leslie Lacy, Contemporary African Literature (Random House, New York, 1972) p. 25.

7 Courlander, p. 41.

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Period	Music	Folktales	Poetry	Short Stories and Essays	Drama Novels and Autobiography
Slavery	"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" "All God's Children Got Wings"		Phillis Wheatley Jupiter Hammon George Moses Horton	To Be a Slave Julius Lester Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass Frederick Douglass	
Underground Railroad	"Go Down, Moses" "Steal Away" "Follow Jonah's Gourd Vine"	Book of Negro Folklore, Langston and Arna Bontemps	"An Antebellum Sermon" Paul L. Dunbar		Moses, Man of the Mountain Zora Neals Hurston Harriet Tubman Ann Petry Blake Martin Delaney
Reconstruction		American Negro Folklore, Richard Dorson Black Folktales, Julius Lester Mules and Men, Zora Neale Hurston		"Atlanta Speech, 1895" Booker T. Washington Souls of Black Folk W. E. B. DuBois Black Man's Burden John D. Killer	A Different Drummer William Melvin Kelley The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman Ernest Gaines Jubilee Margaret Walker Invisible Man Ralph Ellison
Renaissance	"Life Every Voice" James Weldon Johnson		"If We Must Die" Claude McKay Caroling Dusk Countee Cullen	Cane Jean Toomer	
Prosperity 1940's	"My People" Duke Ellington		"For My People" Margaret Walker		Brown Girl, Brownstones Paule Marshall Black Boy Richard Wright Knock on Any Door Willard Motley Raisin In the Sun Lorraine Hansberry
Black Nationalist Movement 1960-1970's	"Young, Gifted and Black" Nina Simone "My People" Duke Ellington		"Black Nada Nihilismus" Leroi Jones "In the Interest of Black Salvation" Don Lee	Jesus Bag Grier & Cobbs Black Rage Grier & Cobbs Recordings of Dick Gregory, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Martin L. King	The Autobiography of Malcolm X Alex Haley and Malcolm X Where Do We Go From Here Martin L. King